ADDRESS TO THE CHURCH MUSIC PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION
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Thank you for inviting us to be with you. It is a welcome break from the "Chicago Spring" which, as you know is an oxymoron. It is good to be reminded that there is sun/warmth somewhere.

I'm particularly glad to be here because of the Shorneys: Steve and Lisa – Steve serves on the Christian Century Board: John and Lisa, are members of Fourth Presbyterian Church and one who is not here – physically – but certainly spiritually – George Shorney and Nancy, very dear friends of ours. George is a truly good man; a gentle man, generous to institutions he believes in, understands that causes and the institutions they spawn deserve good, smart, committed leadership. George is a natural Board member, on the Board of the Christian Century and helped other Board members learn about financial commitment. He has served as a Trustee and Elder at Fourth Presbyterian Church, chaired the committee to find new Organist Director of Music, a supporter of music and all the arts. He and Nancy used to live in the Western Suburbs; Wheaton, a long drive to down town Chicago. He wandered in one Sunday and I was talking about vocation and said something about when I came to terms with the reality that I was never going to play center field for the Pittsburgh Pirates – it opened up other vocational options. George is a hopeless, always hopeful, baseball fan. It was my off-hand reference to playing Center Field that got him: not my eloquent sermon or compelling theology.

His team is the Chicago White Sox. Mine is the Cubs – and we have enjoyed our mutual addiction over many years. Since his team has done consistently better than mine – and actually won a World Series Championship several years ago – something the Cubs have not done since 1908 – yes 103 years ago. George is always sympathetic, kind, understanding – for which I am grateful.

I miss George and Nancy today.

Steve told me that the theme for this event is "A Spirit of Community." I'm delighted by that because, frankly, most of my time in recent years has been spent dealing with something very different: something like "A Spirit of

Conflict, Divisiveness, The Spirit of Argument, Animosity in Fighting" and, in our Presbyterian family, two camps – divided by issues of Biblical authority, theology and morality, and even music – worship wars – whose music is authentic and appropriate and whose is boring and bland?

And so I am delighted to be among brothers and sisters who have none of that, no conflicts with one another, but live in perfect peace and harmony – particularly harmony – with one another. It occurs to me that it might be a good idea to turn the church over to the musicians.

There is something about religion that brings out the best and the worst of us. A self-appointed Pastor in Florida burns a Koran in the name of his religion and half way around the world, a mob, incited by a Clergyman, kill in the name of their religion: United Nations workers, civilians, US soldiers. Back in Florida, the self appointed pastor, who is now a media celebrity, solemnly announced to ABS News that it is all worth it, even the deaths of American soldiers because of the hundreds of thousands of souls who will be saved in the future.

There is something about religion that calls out of us, not only charity and kindness and self sacrifice and generosity, but also what someone called the ugliest word in the English language, "exclusivity," our way or the highway.

Peter Gomes, Pastor of the Memorial Church at Harvard and Professor in the University and Divinity School died recently. Peter's favorite story which I heard him tell many times is about a guided tour of heaven. The guide takes a visitor through a splendid palace, each room filled with merry makers. The visitor sees the Baptists in one room dancing, which was forbidden on earth: the Methodists in another room drinking: the Presbyterians in another large space enjoying unaccustomed chaos: and the Roman Catholics in another larger space enjoying their guilt. As they turn a corner and approach yet another larger room, the guide says, "We must be quiet now: these are the Episcopalians and they think they're the only ones here."

Peter, who was an American Baptist, but talked and acted like a high-church Anglican, always assured people who heard the old joke that they were perfectly free to substitute any denomination they wanted, because "Some people cannot imagine anyone else in their eternity: they imagine

heaven as exclusive as their own church, filled with remarkably similar people." [The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus p.196]

So I am glad to be with a group of brothers and sisters under the gracious company of a "Spirit of Community."

Part of my work these days is with the Christian Century magazine, a bi-weekly journal of Faith and Culture. We publish articles on relevant theological and social, cultural issues, politics, the arts, the economy, the churches. We are about the same business as you are – pointing people to a truth bigger than any one of our abilities to completely understand; pointing to the reality of God – God who is to be celebrated and praised and worshiped not only in gathered formality but in lives lived faithfully in the world.

There is simply no more important task in this world than that.

If you ever wonder whether what you are doing is important, here is a story for you.

A good friend of mine died two weeks ago. His name was George Cotsirilis. He was 90 years old and one of the best and fiercest defense attorneys in Chicago. His parents immigrated from Greece and Greek culture was deep in George's soul. He loved everything Greek. Greek food, Greek dancing and Greek music. Three weeks ago George had a massive stroke, which took away almost all of his wonderful, intelligent, human characteristics … I caught up with George and Joan, his wonderful wife with whom he enjoyed a second great marriage – in Northwestern Hospital. Joan had been by his bed side all night. In the middle of the night, she told me George was making some sounds – as if he were trying to talk to her. She put her head on his chest and listened closely. "Are you singing, honey?" she asked. He nodded his head. "Are you singing a Greek song, George?" He nodded. "Is it a song you used to sing in school?" Again, he nodded. So – there he was – deprived of about everything that made him the wonderful human being we all loved – everything but music – song – singing.

It is so deep in us – in our minds and in our souls.

I can't even begin to imagine religion without music. There is a West African saying, "Without singing, the Spirit will not come." Barbara Brown Taylor says singing is what makes us human.

My earliest experiences of God are all associated with music, sitting on the pew of the Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church in Altoona, Pennsylvania between my parents, listening to them sing – my father had a very nice tenor voice. "For the Beauty of the Earth", "When Morning Gilds the Skies", "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee". I recall mother, while we were singing that hymn, sharing a hymnal, pointing to the name up in the corner of the page – "Ludwig von Beethoven." I recall our organist, Mary Wertz, playing "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring", and knowing that something important was going on. I recall summer church camp and Vesper Hill, and the hard wooden benches, and looking out over a deep green-blue vista of a Pennsylvania Pine Forest and the Vigil of Silence that even a Junior High can understand – and the little choir of adolescents singing: "The Lord is in his Holy Temple. Let all the Earth keep Salvation before him. Keep Silence. Keep Silence. Keep Silence before him."

We lived beside a big family of robust Baptists: three boys and two girls. The boys were all trumpet players. Our houses were close: we could pretty much hear and see what the Esteps were doing and they could watch and listen to us. They were all musicians, the boys played trumpets and were good. The Estep's favorite evening activity was to gather around the piano and play and sing and play hymns. "Jesus Saves, Jesus Saves"; "Onward Christian Soldiers". In the day before air conditioning when people spent summer evenings sitting on the porch, it was free and lively entertainment.

So I became a trumpet player – not bad, in fact. They took me along to BYPU, and Sunday Night Prayer Meeting at the First Baptist Church to be part of the Trumpet Trio to accompany the hymn singing. I learned to sight read and transpose from trumpet B-flat to piano and organ C and to read the bass clef, tenor line of Ivory Palaces – no mean feat.

When our small city launched a Symphony Orchestra I was invited to play third trumpet. Now there is not a lot for the trumpets – particularly third chair – to do in a Symphony Orchestra, but count and listen. And that is what I did. And one of my most vivid memories is of rehearsing Beethoven's Fifth and sitting beside the Horn section – the Naylor brothers who drove over the mountain from Johnstown because they were the best French Horn

players in Central Pennsylvania – and when they launched into that glorious da-ta-ta-ta, da-ta-ta-ta – the hair raising on the back of my neck and tears coming to my eyes so I could barely read the music.

Charles Darwin kept a journal on his legendary voyage on H.M.S. Beagle, 1832, to study plant and animal life. The ship docked to resupply and somewhere in the south of Chile and he hiked up into the mountains and sat down on an Andean peak and wrote in his journal:

> "When we reached the crest and looked backward: a glorious view, the atmosphere so resplendently clear, the sky an intense blue, the profound valleys, the quiet mountains of snow. It was like hearing in full orchestra a chorus of The Messiah." [Speaking of Faith, Krista Tippet p.77]

And distinguished Roman Catholic theologian Haus Küng – in the middle of a rigorous little book on Religion and Science – said, "if you want to understand the biblical words 'Let there be light', don't turn to physics or philosophy but to Franz Joseph Haydn's Creation with the surprising fortissimo change in the whole orchestra from dark E Minor into radiant, triumphant C Major."

Some of the Reformers were suspicious of music; its emotional power and propensity to arouse. So out went instruments and organ and hymn singing. Some even suggested that singing in harmony is essentially erotic. Not Martin Luther. Luther saved the day musically for Protestants. He said: "When man's natural musical ability is whetted and polished to the extent that it becomes an art, then do we note with quiet surprise the great and perfect wisdom of God."

Luther had no patience with those who disagreed… "A person who does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being: he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs." [I am indebted to Blair Monie. A Matter of Taste? 1/21/11 Presentation to Church Music Instruments, Dallas, TX for the quote]

Talk about a worship war!

I decided, early on, to stay as far away from that as possible – with this group – except for one thought (or maybe two). I think "traditional" vs "contemporary" is entirely the wrong paradigm. Contemporary music can fit with the tradition and traditional music can be written last week. So if not traditional vs contemporary, what is it? May I suggest two alternatives: 1. Interesting vs boring. It is not written into the laws of the universe that organ music is boring – nor that electric guitar music is inherently interesting. There are, I propose, as many boring guitarists as boring organists. 2. Other directed vs inner directed. Music, it seems to me, should take me out of myself. Church music should lift me up and reorient me away from myself for a few precious moments and point me to the mystery of God, the amazing Grace of God.

Tom Long, in a recent Christian Century wrote an article critical of what he calls self-centered, self-absorbed church music. He had particularly harsh words for "Here I am Lord. It is I Lord." – actually it's "Is it I Lord?" not "It is I Lord" – a fairly important rhetorical and theological difference. Long just doesn't like it – said "Given this hymn's Glee-like musical setting, it comes across less like an awestruck Isaiah trembling before God in the temple and more like an ecclesiastical Put me in, Coach! I can play centerfield." [CC 2/22/11 p.49] He made a lot of people angry and we received a lot of unhappy mail – and the hymn is one of the favorites at my church.

I cannot imagine my faith without music. Every year, as I think about Easter and the responsibility of proclaiming that Christ is Risen and then talking about its meaning for twenty minutes or so I remember something Reinhold Neibuhr said. He was perhaps the greatest American theologian of the 20th Century and a powerful preacher. He taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. On Christmas and Easter, Niebuhr said he and his wife chose to attend a high-liturgical where there wasn't so much talking – but a lot of music. No preacher is up to the task on Easter – or Christmas. Music is far better vehicle for the huge Christian concepts of Incarnation and Resurrection.

Every preacher knows it. "Jesus Christ is Risen Today," sung on Easter morning by a full congregation of people with full organ and brass, who have come to hear good news is a far better vehicle than the sermon he or she has prepared. The smartest of us turn it over to the choir and the organ and the trumpets.

I will, of course, preach an Easter sermon, but I will be deeply grateful for the choir and organist and brass players – and for the entire community of music around and before this particular Easter morning: men and women who have written the music and published the hymnals and the anthems, preludes, postludes, songs, choruses, prayer responses, and allow us to rejoice in news too good and too big for words alone.

On Palm Sunday, Sue and I will put the Mozart Requiem on the CD player and it will be background music for Holy Week – all week long, the terrible beauty of the Passion.

And I'll begin not only to ponder the magnificent mystery of atonement, suffering love, of life in the midst of death – but also to sing, in my heart, quietly hum a simple hymn tune – that lives in my soul and has all my life

"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." I'd love it if you – with so much music in you – could help me get started:

> When I survey the wondrous cross
> On which the Prince of Glory died,
> My richest gain I count but loss,
> And pour contempt on all my pride.
>
> Were the whole realm of nature mine,
> That were a present far too small;
> Love so amazing, so divine,
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.